Loyalty and Love of Israel by Diasporan Jews

The relationship of Diaspora Jewry to Israel has been the focus of intense, sometimes bitter debate, both before and after the establishment of the State of Israel. The creation of Israel in the shadow of the Holocaust and the “ingathering” of Jews from around the world in its first decade muted critical voices, even those who had been ambivalent. In the early years of the state, what began as harsh rhetoric about shlilat ha’golah (negation of the Diaspora) and the impossibility of full Jewish life outside of Israel, moderated and Diaspora Jews learned to love Israel, without feeling guilty about not making aliya. In particular among American Jews, perhaps the most settled Jewish Diasporans, Israel became a focus of extraordinary pride. The 1967 Six Day War was an exceptional moment that promoted solidarity. Since then, levels of support and engagement with Israel have remained consistently high, although there are some perturbations in levels of support associated with periods of heightened hostility or threats to Israel. Despite Gabriel Sheffer’s claims about current Diaspora-Israel relations, attitudes toward Israel among Diaspora Jewry remain extremely positive. American Jews in particular are highly attached to Israel and there is little indication that recent political debates have changed the fundamental picture.

Sheffer’s thesis is that there is diminished support and loyalty toward Israel among Diaspora Jewry, reflected by mounting criticism of its policies and driven by assimilation and growing heterogeneity of Diaspora Jewish communities. Further, although support remains, he sees the traditional relationship of Israel to the Diaspora undergoing major change. Sheffer’s analysis, however, is incorrect in a number of ways. The socio-demographic picture of Diaspora Jewry is somewhat different than Sheffer imagines and he misappreciates the way in which political differences are framed outside of Israel. Nevertheless, Sheffer attempts to apply the framework surrounding the more combative social discourse in Israel to the Diaspora.
United States Jewry constitutes the largest group of Jewish Diasporans and the one about which we have the most knowledge. Although Sheffer includes Jews in other Western countries in his discussion, because of the size of the community here, much of what he concludes references American Jewry. Rather than aging out and being in decline, as Sheffer and others suggest, our latest analyses indicate that the population is increasing. As well, interest in Israel is growing. To be sure, there is critical rhetoric about Israel and, in particular, the policies of the current government, but there is little evidence American Jews are “distancing” themselves from Israel. Debate among American Jews about Israel is intense, much as in Israel, and new organizations have formed, in particular because of gaps between the views of ordinary Jews and communal leaders. It is difficult to predict the future—and what transpires will depend on Israel’s ability to resolve its internal and external conflicts—but, for now, there is little evidence to indicate that American Jews are abandoning their traditional support for Israel.

We describe the contemporary American Jewish community and the ways in which it is changing. The focus then shifts to attitudinal data and the claim that political differences are causing a fissure in relationships. Finally, we describe the future prospects for the relationship of US Jewry to Israel. The portrait that emerges is quite different than that suggested by Sheffer.

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN JEWRY

Underlying Sheffer’s critical assessment is his sense that Diaspora Jews are bifurcated into a group of “hardcore” Jews and others who may identify as Jews, but are “well adjusted” to their host communities and do not “sympathize” with Israel. At least in the case of US Jewry, the situation is far more complex than a community neatly divided into core and non-core. Rather than static communities, there is flux and, as Horowitz has noted, American Jews move in and out of engagement with their Jewish identities. To be sure, there are differences among groups of American Jews in the strength of Jewish identity, but many of the factors thought to differentiate Jews—in particular, intermarriage—are at their root, the result of different levels of Jewish education. As Jewish education in the United States is reinvigorated and expanded, these differences may dissipate, or at least, look very different.

Nevertheless, American Jews are extremely comfortable in their host country and, for many, ethnic and religious distinctiveness is not cherished.
Once again, the picture is complex. Since the founding of the United States, Jews have experienced religious freedom; although, as well, discrimination has been part of the Jewish experience. Today, however, American Jews live in a society largely free of overt antisemitism and in an era in which they have achieved unprecedented wealth and influence. As a religious and ethnic minority in the United States, Jews are distinguished by their high levels of education and socio-economic status.

Undoubtedly, the acceptance and success of American Jews has come at the price of communal distinctiveness and solidarity. For some, the American Jewish community is slowly dissolving and, metaphorically, it has been likened to an ice cube melting at room temperature. Predictions of the end of the Jewish community, or its shrinkage to a small group of highly religious individuals, are ripe. However, they are incorrect.

The latest socio-demographic analyses indicate that the US Jewish population is larger than previously estimated and is growing in pace with the size of the overall population. There is controversy about the numbers, but there is substantial agreement that earlier estimates (in particular, those based on the National Jewish Population Survey 2000–01) did not adequately reflect the size of the population. The most unequivocal aspect of current estimates is that, in terms of Jews who identify by religion, there are c. 4.2 million Jewish adults in the United States. There are, in addition, 650,000 Jewish adults who identify by criteria other than religion and 1.5 million children. The total is approximately 6.5 million.

How can it be that the population is growing in an era in which assimilation is rampant? One reason underlying population growth is immigration. Over the last 20 years, more than half a million Jews came to the United States from the Former Soviet Union, as well as from South America and Israel. However, the population is also growing because the dynamics of intermarriage have changed. In 1992, the American Jewish community was galvanized by the finding that 52% of recent marriages among Jews were to non-Jews. In an earlier era, to intermarry was to reject Judaism and engagement with the community. That has shifted, however, and an increasing number of intermarried families are choosing to raise their children as Jews.

Finally, we are now reaping the benefits of the increased emphasis on continuity and Jewish education efforts begun in the 1990s. The system of Jewish education that evolved in the post-WW II era has been revamped from top to bottom. Both in the formal sectors (day schools, part-time schools) as well in so-called “informal education” (camps, Israel experience programs), what exists today bears little resemblance to the programs that
existed in earlier eras. Perhaps the most extraordinary development has been the revival of old programs and creation of new ones to serve college students. From the rebuilding of Hillel and the growth of campus Chabad organizations, to the development of Taglit-Birthright Israel, and the explosion of Jewish and Israel studies on campus, there is an expanded educational pathway to involvement in the Jewish community.

Given these developments, it should not be surprising that more Americans are claiming their Jewish identity and that the population is growing. To be sure, not all the signs are positive. In fact, despite the improved state of Jewish education in America, levels of Jewish knowledge, of Hebrew, and Jewish culture are far lower than anyone sees as desirable. Moreover, in terms of membership in synagogues, donations to federations and a host of traditional measures of Jewish engagement, population growth has not netted corresponding gains. To some extent, the jury is out on future developments. The key question is whether the next generation of adults—in particular, those who are now turning 30 years old—will still engage their Jewish identities, will marry Jewishly, and raise their children as Jews.

**CONNECTION TO ISRAEL**

Sheffer uses the word “loyalty” to describe Diaspora Jews’ relationship to Israel, however, “caring,” “closeness,” and “attachment” are the more typical terms used in attitude surveys and better frame US Jews’ views of their connection to Israel. There is a long history of measuring American Jewry’s attitudes toward Israel and, in conjunction, assessing its relationship to Jewish identity. As shown in Figure 1, over a long period of time (from 1989 to 2008), the vast majority of American Jews agree that “caring about Israel” is a very important part of their Jewish identity and that they feel close to Israel. There is a slight dip in 2007 and 2008, but it is non-significant and brings the levels to where they were around 1990. It is not surprising that attitudes would become slightly more positive in the wake of 9/11 and the Second Intifada.

What is, perhaps, even more telling are several recent analyses that Sasson and colleagues have done to assess changes in young adult attitudes. Using a variety of data—from population and attitudes surveys that have been conducted multiple times—they examined young adult attitudes toward Israel. In each case, what is clear is that attachment to Israel grows over time. American Jews are not born with feelings of closeness and
attachment. These sentiments grow, in particular during a person’s twenties and thirties. Perhaps most surprising is that today’s young adults have stronger attachment to Israel than earlier generations. Although we do not have perfect data, it seems that the phenomenon is related to lifecycle, not specific to the contemporary cohort of young adults.

Again, we are faced with evidence that contradicts that common wisdom. One explanation, particularly important to understanding high levels of Jewish young adult connections with Israel, is a single intervention has significantly changed the environment for Jewish young adults. Since late 1999, Taglit-Birthright Israel has taken nearly 300,000 Jewish young adults (200,000 from North America) to Israel for ten-day educational tours. Taglit has placed Jewish identity and Israel on the consciousness map of young adults. Because its focus is on people-to-people connections rather than geo-politics, the program has remained relatively free of political controversy. That the program is cost-free has made it possible for tens of thousands of Jews, many with little or no Jewish education and some who had lost contact with the Jewish community, to participate. At the same time, a host of other programs—for high school, gap year, and college students—have expanded and enabled other young adults to experience Israel. The result is that contemporary young Jews are more likely to have visited Israel than older generations. These young adults
come away not only with high levels of attachment to Israel, but with a sense of Jewish peoplehood.

Taglit and other educational programs that connect US Jews and Israel are some of the factors responsible for high attachment to Israel. In parallel, technology and travel advances have made Israel less “distant” and have facilitated contact with Israeli family and friends. From the role of the Internet to providing information about Israel, the expanding presence of Israeli businesses and products, the number of Israelis who reside in the United States, and the increasing family connections between Russian Jewish immigrants in Israel and the United States, there are a host of reasons why American Jews who seek interaction with Israelis experience fewer barriers to doing so. Rather than attenuating, the number of American Jews who feel close to Israel, and for whom Israel is central to their identity, is increasing.

ARE POLITICAL ISSUES CAUSING A FISSURE?

If the US Jewish community is not melting away and if, in fact, more young Jews travel to Israel and feel strong connections, what is the impact of political developments in Israel on American Jewish feelings and their views of Israel? Like Sheffer, some Jewish American commentators suggest that current events are leading to a fissure in the relationship of American Jews to Israel. The general argument, at least vis-a-vis young adults, is that this demographic is overwhelmingly politically liberal while Israel’s government and policies are increasingly “illiberal.” This incompatibility will lead to a natural fissure. Young adults are contrasted with their parents, whose image of Israel as a democratic state threatened by undemocratic Arab states was shaped by the Six Day and Yom Kippur Wars. For these young adults, however, Israel is seen as capable of defending itself and engaged in the subjugation of Palestinians. It is very different than the historical view of Israel. Nearly a century ago, Louis Brandeis, the quintessential liberal who became the first Jewish justice on the US Supreme Court, claimed that belief in the American ideal required that one be a Zionist. Some now argue that just the opposite is the case.

This critical perspective on American Jewish attitudes to Israel has gained traction in part because of the intensity of feelings about Israel among American Jewry. Those who support and reject the government of Israel’s political positions have formed organizations to promote their views. What is curious is that the intensity of the debate suggests that both groups,
their political disagreements notwithstanding, are highly connected to Israel. Why else would they be so passionate about Israeli policy? Although there is a sense that American Jews are increasingly divided about Israel along generational and political lines, the situation is far more complex. Numerous studies show that political ideology and attachment are distinct constructs, and there is little evidence that liberals are growing more distant from Israel.

What is the nature of the connection? For some American Jews, the religious calling of the return to Zion is the most palpable, and often their residence in the United States is seen as preparation for aliya. For other less religious Jews, support and identification with Israel is related to pride over its intellectual, cultural, and military accomplishments. For still others, Israel is a symbol of the rebirth of the Jewish people after the Holocaust and reminder of their parents’ and grandparents’ lives and struggles. For others, Israel represents the sense of community and national purpose that they feel has been lost in most Western cultures. Israel is, perhaps, a projective test for American Jews who layer their own hopes and aspirations on that of their counterparts in Israel.

Israel has been a binding force and a source of pride, particularly for those who express strong identification with Judaism, but for others as well. In part, Israel, greatly admired by Americans of all faiths, has helped to create a positive environment for US Jews. Although there is increasingly strident political discord about Israel’s policies regarding Palestinians, Israel remains a favored country and admired for its success. As well, in balance theory terms, Israel is the enemy of groups that most Americans consider the enemy (responsible for 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) and, thus, is considered by most an ally.

Nevertheless, recent political and strategic developments have strained the relationship between the United States and Israel and prompted debate among American Jews and non-Jews. The 2008 Gaza war engendered widespread debate over Israel’s war objectives and the protection of civilians in zones of conflict. President Obama’s demand that Israel freeze construction in West Bank settlements and East Jerusalem was opposed by some Jewish organizations and supported by others. The UN Human Rights Commission’s Goldstone Report on the Gaza war, although bitterly denounced as biased and one-sided by Israel and American Jewish organizations, was widely discussed. More recently, Israel’s interdiction of a flotilla of ships bringing supplies to Gaza renewed debate over the Gaza embargo. The impasse in negotiations, combined with efforts to silence dissent among Israelis and punish those who support boycotts, has created the potential for
an even greater rift. Once again, despite the potential for distancing from Israel, there is little evidence that it has occurred.

To understand resilience of American Jewish support for Israel, current events need to be placed into context. Although we live in what is, perhaps, a golden age of science and human accomplishment, we continue to experience ongoing military conflicts, political and economic instability. For US Jews, who have been both extraordinarily successful and also mortally threatened by this success, Israel has potent symbolic value. Israel represents successful coping, even in an age of uncertainty. It provides American Jews with a connection to their history, language, culture, and traditions. In a world that often seems unstable, it should not be surprising that American Jews feel highly connected to Israel and that the experience of interacting with Israeli Jews brings them closer not only to Israel and their Jewish identities, but also provides a sense of meaning.

At the same time, that some Jews in America feel distant from Israel is not unexpected. Differing cultural, language, political, and religious sensibilities inhibit a sense of unity and common purpose. What is clear, however, is that education and interaction are the key antidotes to disaffiliation and distancing. Providing American Jews—young/old, secular/religious, committed/not committed—with opportunities to understand and engage with Israelis and Israeli culture enhances both their sense of Jewish identity and their closeness to Israel.

To put this analysis in perspective, consider what has happened to American Jews vis-a-vis their political standing in the United States. American Jews are overwhelmingly liberal and vote Democratic; yet, in both 2000 and 2004, their candidate for president was defeated. Even though the 2000 election was hotly contested and, eventually, had to be decided by the Supreme Court, few suggested that American Jews were disloyal because their position was not sustained. In the same vein, why should American Jews’ love of Israel—their “loyalty”—be questioned because they may disagree with the policies of the elected government? Jewish tradition has always involved individuals’ differences of perspective and interpretation. Jews are the people of Torah, of which each page is said to have shivîm panîm (seventy faces). To parallel a famous phrase of Simon Rawidowicz, Jews are an “ever-dying people,” and it is the struggle with existence and continuity that is our strength.
Notes


17. Sasson et al., “Understanding Young Adult Attachment to Israel: Period, Lifecycle, and Generational Dynamics.”


